

(1) Afghan Peace...

Working toward intra-Afghan talks

In Moscow Wednesday, two days of talks between the Taliban and Afghan political leaders ended, although no representatives from the current government of President Ashraf Ghani were in attendance, sparking anger in Kabul. The Taliban consider the Kabul government a Western puppet and has so far refused to directly negotiate with it.

The 10-member Taliban delegation has instead been meeting with almost 50 influential Afghans, including politicians, former jihadi leaders, civil society activists and former President Hamid Karzai.

The final statement issued after the talks in Moscow declared that a complete withdrawal of U.S.-led foreign forces from Afghanistan is the key to lasting peace in Afghanistan.

Khalilzad said the Russia-backed talks were positive as long as they helped facilitate intra-Afghan talks, not if they "polarize Afghans further."

"I'm not seeking to monopolize" the Afghan peace process, Khalilzad said, adding that regional countries should play a role in the process.

Khalilzad, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, said Friday that the Taliban and Afghan government leaders must "sit across the table from each other and come to an agreement about the future of their country."

He said there were indications that the Taliban could sit down with government representatives in a "multiparty format." (VoA)

(2) Afghan Air Force...

"We have made unprecedented progress in handling and maintaining these helicopters," he told a February 7 ceremony marking the graduation of 26 Afghan pilots and gunners. They will soon be deployed to handle some of the 16 UH-60 Black Hawks that the United States has delivered to Afghanistan.

Shirzai, commander of the Kandahar air wing, says they recently successfully carried out a 2,000-hour overhaul and maintenance of two Russian-built Mi-17 helicopters in the province, where the capital, also called Kandahar, is a major hub for air operations.

"This is an achievement, and we aim to keep on building our capacities," he said. "Our aim is to be self-sufficient."

However, in a recent report, the U.S. Special Inspector for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) called on the Pentagon to improve pilot training and create a teaching program for Afghan maintenance crews while also working to improve their English-language skills. SIGAR has urged the U.S. Defense Department to prepare the Afghan Air Force to absorb all 159 UH-60 Black Hawks now slotted to be delivered by 2023.

"Given concerns that the Afghan Air Force and special mission wing may not be able to fully use all 159 aircraft when delivered, the Department of Defense runs the risk of wasting U.S. taxpayer dollars to purchase aircraft the AAF and SMW cannot fly or maintain," SIGAR said on February 5.

The warning came amid a rapidly evolving U.S. approach toward its 17-year war in Afghanistan. In recent months, Washington and the Taliban have made visible progress toward an agreement on ending the war. But the talks also loom large over the future of Afghan security forces.

Afghans recently reacted sharply to a senior Taliban official who said

they would like to see the Western-backed military dissolved after the departure of U.S. troops. There are mounting fears that in case of a U.S. troop pullout the Afghan military will find itself scrambling for funding and technical support.

In Kandahar, the newly trained pilots, however, are focusing on their jobs.

"We are ready to support our ground forces and take on the enemy day and night," Farid Uddin, one of the Black Hawk pilots, told Radio Free Afghanistan.

Shirzai, likewise, is not worrying about the larger geopolitical questions surrounding Afghanistan.

He does say, though, that he wants the Afghan president and defense minister to focus on building the country's security forces so that they can take on the enemy.

"I expect our young pilots to work hard and do their best in defending their country and fighting our enemies," he said. (Monitoring Desk)

(3) Women, Civil...

role in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process.

The role of women and civil society activists had been ignored since the launched of efforts for peace and reconciliation which included the meetings of US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Moscow meeting.

Abdullah Ahmadi, the working group member of the civil society, said all the meetings subject to peace and reconciliation saw rare participation of women.

He said the weak participation of women and civil society members in the intra-Afghan talks was one of the huge concerns of women activists and civil society members.

Humaira Saqib, head of the Afghanistan Women Reporters criticised the non-participation of women and civil society members in peace parleys and added they could reflect the will of the people through their participation. She said women participation could ensure the establishment of a just and sustainable peace and reconciliation process.

The two-day intra-Afghan meeting in Moscow, the capital of Russian and attended by key Afghan political figures including the Taliban who had launched direct talks with the US to end the 19-year-old war.

Four presidential candidates Mohammad Hanif Atmar, Zalmay Rasoul, Anwar-ul-Haq Ulumi, Abdul Latif Pedram, representatives of the Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan, Wahdat-i-Islami, Jumbesh-i-Melli, women representatives, civil society activist and journalist took part. Experts termed the Moscow meeting a positive step in the way of peace and reconciliation in the war-torn country, while others dubbed it a failed attempt because the Kabul administration was missing. (Pajhwok)

(4) Mullah Baradar...

"The role that Pakistan has played in terms of its relationship with the Taliban and the Haqqani network has been a burden on this (US-Pak) relationship. They say they want peace. We welcome that. We want them to play a positive role," Khalilzad continued.

In recent weeks, the envoy held several rounds of talks with representatives of the Taliban in Doha. "Most of the meetings have not been in Pakistan. It has been in other countries. I think the message is peace in Afghanistan will help our relations with Pakistan."

Peace in Afghanistan would help Kabul-Islamabad relations and regional connectivity. Pakistan would be a beneficiary of that.

"Let's seize this opportunity, this moment for the region for Afghanistan, especially for the obviously

long suffering people of Afghanistan," Khalilzad said.

He referred to statements from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and President Donald Trump about the US desire to have good relations with Pakistan. (Pajhwok)

(5) Karzai Linked...

Afghanistan, and that Afghanistan is stable and calm," he said.

The former president expressed his deep gratitude to Russia on behalf of all the Afghan people, as well as from the Taliban.

He said the two-day meeting exceeded all the expectations the participants had.

"We hope that the talks in Moscow, as well as the decisions that have been made here, will bring long-awaited peace, national sovereignty, and progress to the Afghan people," he said. (Pajhwok)

(6) 80 WJ Candidates...

refer to the judicial organ concerned.

Abdul Aziz Aryae, head of the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IEC), said those who lost the elections were unhappy but they should not fuel ethnic, linguistic and other issues for their failure. Niamatullah Karyab, a successful candidate from Kunar province said: "I acknowledge that the elections were full of challenges and problems, but still the masses thronged polling centres and voted for their favorite candidates." (Pajhwok)

(7) 3 ANA Soldiers...

and 9 others wounded and one tank of the soldiers was also destroyed by the rebels, he said. Three Taliban fighters were also killed and 7 wounded in Afghan forces retaliation attack.

The Taliban have not yet said anything in this regard. (Pajhwok)

(8) Library Established...

activists and local officials. "Since the establishment of this library, we see many prisoners who spend their time at this library to read books," said Rouhllah, a prisoner.

"We appreciate those who established this library and we are trying to spend more time here," said Khairullah, a prisoner.

According to local officials, vocational trainings on tailoring, embroidery and painting are also provided for the prisoners. (Tolo news)

(9) Nabi Unavailable...

unpredictability around when players are called into camp," Renegades coach Andrew McDonald said. "Nabi has been a valuable contributor throughout the season and his skills with bat and ball as well as leadership abilities will be missed.

"We are proud of the way we have been able to cover the absence of key players throughout the season and we're confident in the depth of our squad. There is now an exciting opportunity for someone to come into the team and play an important role for us."

Nabi has scored 228 runs and taken eight wickets for the Renegades this season. (Agencies)

(10) Key Daesh Member...

parts of Kabul on charges of terror acts and they have confessed that they were encouraged by Mutawakil to join the terror outfit.

The NDS says that a nephew of Mutawakil carried out a suicide attack two months ago in Kabul. (Tolo news)

(11) Chinese Orchestra...

him was the Erhu performance, which was his first time hearing the traditional Chinese instrument.

Greek deputy UN envoy Dionysios Kalamvrezos was brought

back to his "good old days" in China when he had worked in Beijing from 2011 to 2014. "The first part of the concert, mostly Chinese music, evoked my attachment to China. I love the Chinese language. I love the Chinese culture."

His teenage daughter Andromeda said in Chinese that she could feel the music was sending a message of a joyous Spring Festival.

Founded in late 2016, the young orchestra from China's eastern city of Suzhou has performed in multiple countries including France, Germany, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan, said its director Chen Guangxian.

He added the orchestra is very young and highly international, with its 70 members hailing from 20 countries and regions. The average age of the members is 30. (Xinhua)

(12) Saudi Arabia...

Two weeks before he was due to face trial in June 2017, a black SUV pulled up outside his house and took him to a secluded spot where his ankle monitor was cut off. At this point, US Homeland Security says he was likely issued with a false identity and left the country on a private plane. (RT)

(13) Hypersonic Fever...

including two hypersonic devices, the Kinzhal air-launched missile and the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle. The first system, said to be capable of flying at least 10 times faster than sound, has been already deployed to the Russian Air Force. The Avangard, capable of reaching a whopping Mach 27 speed, was successfully tested late last year. The system is launched atop an inter-continental ballistic missile and serves as a delivery vehicle for a nuclear warhead.

China has also carried out a series of successful tests on a hypersonic glider vehicle since 2014. The device is said to be capable of reaching speeds up to Mach 10. The United States, for its part, admitted that it has been dragging behind the two military powers, and hastily launched a program to design such weaponry of its own. At the same time, the US embarked on studying the feasibility of space-based interceptor systems in an attempt to counter foreign weapon systems - which, as of now, are widely believed to be invincible against conventional missile-defense systems. (RT)

(14) EU Urges...

rather than a nationwide consensus."

The EU says London agreeing to closer ties with the bloc after Brexit would largely obviate the need for a contentious "backstop" provision in the future, an insurance policy meant to keep the border between Ireland and the British-run province of Northern Ireland open under any and all circumstances.

"We are looking at those proposals with interest but there are obviously very considerable points of difference that exist between us," said a senior official in May's office.

"The PM continues to believe that an independent trade policy is one of the key advantages of Brexit," the person said under condition of anonymity.

Staying in a customs union with the EU would limit the UK's ability to seal trade deals with other countries on its own.

But the bloc believes that solution might be acceptable to the Northern Irish unionists propping up May's government, as well as to at least some Labour lawmakers, and thus secure a parliamentary majority for the divorce deal be-

fore Britain leaves on March 29. Given the EU's opposition to the concessions on the backstop that May is currently demanding, the only alternative appears to Brussels to be a delay to the exit and/or a "no-deal" Brexit, with no transition period to soften the economic rupture. (Reuters)

(15) Pompeo Seeks...

Hungary has drawn especially deep concerns among Western powers as Prime Minister Viktor Orban shows growing authoritarianism, buddies up with Russian President Vladimir Putin despite Western worries over Ukraine and willfully exercises Hungary's veto within the 28-member EU.

A US official said Pompeo will raise concerns about Orban's support for the Russian-backed Turk-Stream gas pipeline, Moscow's financing of the Paks nuclear plant in Hungary -- and especially the country's agreement to let Huawei develop its 5G mobile networks, as Washington accuses the Chinese telecom giant of undermining global security.

The right-wing leaders of Poland and Hungary have been among the few Europeans to praise Trump, sharing his hard line against refugees, his extolling of Christian values and his antipathy toward the power of multilateral bodies such as the EU.

The Trump administration initially welcomed engagement with Orban, who received the cold shoulder from former US president Barack Obama, but concerns have mounted in Washington that Hungary has moved no closer into the US orbit.

Last year, Hungary disappointed the United States by sending two suspected Russian arms dealers wanted by Washington back home.

And despite the US ambassador's intervention, Budapest's renowned Central European University last year said it was moving key programs to Vienna due to tough requirements imposed by Orban on institutions it considers foreign. (AFP)

(16) Seeking Influence...

An African diplomat told AFP that Egypt -- along with fellow heavyweights South Africa and Nigeria -- does not want a powerful AU.

This diplomat, who has been tracking AU affairs for over a decade, said Cairo has "never forgotten" its suspension in 2013.

The near year-long lock out from the AU came after Egypt's army deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, who in 2012 had become the country's first democratically elected president.

Sisi is due to take the helm at the AU's biannual heads of state assembly, which takes place on February 10 and 11 at the AU's gleaming headquarters in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.

As usual, the continent's multiple security crises will be high on the VIPs' agenda.

Rwanda's ambitious funding proposal will also likely be on the table.

But it has met resistance not only from Egypt, but other member states, so may fail to pass. (AFP)

(17) Venezuela's Guaido...

"The armed forces have a huge dilemma, whether or not to accept the aid. It would be almost miserable at this point of huge necessity not to accept it."

-Question: When will the first attempt be?

"I think it's going to be next week, when we have formed the corps of volunteers and organized the distribution process." (AFP)